

## On Islam's Attitude towards Sustainable Development

A Comment on Abul Hassan: Islamic Economics and the Environment : Material Flow  
Analysis on Society-Nature Interterrationships\*

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Having read the paper by Abul-Hassan entitled "***Islamic Economics and the Environment: Material Flow Analysis in Society-Nature Interrelationship***", I thought it might be useful to write some thoughts about sustainable development from Islamic perspective. His excellent paper has focused on some ways of achieving global sustainable development in accordance with the Islamic economic system.

Development is one of the major means utilized by man in his effort to survive. The human understanding of the concept of development has been greatly broadened to be much more comprehensive. It is no longer restricted to industrial or economic development, but it encompasses the concept of sustainability whereby development strikes a balance between both the economic, social and environmental aspects. An emphasis is therefore placed on the environment, from one side, and its link to and integration into the economic development considerations, from the other. This is done without depleting the natural resources to realize the present progress at the expense of future generations.

Despite the progress achieved during the last few decades, there are over 1 billion persons living in absolute poverty, reeling under conditions of inadequate resources to finance their education, lacking the basic health and environmental services and other resources that avail them of the chance for better lives.

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(\*) see p. 15.

The world recognizes that environmental problems could undermine development objectives. That is, the enhancement induced by development to the welfare of a society could be offset by the cost of environment degradation incurred in terms of health and the quality of life. The risk of the continuous environmental degradation in the Islamic countries is hardly a hypothetical issue; in fact, it doesn't threaten the present generation only, but future generations as well. The welfare of man, and even his very existence, is jeopardized unless environmental protection and safety are considered as an integral part of the national security. Sustainable development programs could succeed only if mass media and educational institutions become a pivotal link between the environmental specialists and organizations, on the one hand, and the public, on the other. This will certainly give the environmental concepts a good push through the influence they practice on the society's behaviors and values, leading to conservation of the environment. In reality, poverty alleviation constitutes a great and unexplored opportunity to succeed in the real sustainable development. Poverty alleviation is not merely an ethical imperative, but a requisite for environmental proper management.

### **The concept of Development:**

There is hardly a uniform economic definition for development, which includes production increase and the various elements of progress accompanied by a comprehensive change in all aspects of life.

Accordingly, it is a radical change in the method of production with the consequent changes in the different social structures. Through development, though, societies could achieve the growth it aspires. In this context, however, the potential confusion between the concept of development and the Western civilization, or its features, should be avoided; otherwise, society may turn to a consumer of goods and services without acquiring the capabilities to be sophisticated from the viewpoint of production. In other words, such society would be deprived of the foundation as well as the basic factors of a technologically advanced society that produces goods rather than just consumes them<sup>(1)</sup>. Thus the Western theories on economic development are inappropriate to the present conditions of the Islamic countries<sup>(2)</sup>. This requires devising a development theory that fits the particular situations of these countries. In addition to this location-related disparity, the concepts of development have another difference pertaining to time. In the 1950s and 1960s, the concept of development was linked to the economic process and its role in aggregating wealth as a means to increasing human well-being. With the advancement of science and the scientific experience of the nations, such concepts have been expanded to include both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of material and the human being.

During the earth summit, convened in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil in 1992, the world acknowledged that real development was one in which the economic, social and environmental concepts integrate. Based on this understanding, the concept of sustainable development has been adopted as a basis for a program of action for sustainable development worldwide (known as Agenda 21).

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(1) **Amr Mohideen** (1972), *Development and Economic Planning*, (Arabic), Al-Nahda Publishing House, Beirut, p. 210.

(2) **Hussein Omar** (1978), *Development and Economic Planning*, (Arabic) Sharouq Publishing, Jeddah, p. 29.

In 1983, the United Nations established the world commission on environment and development, which published in 1987 its flagship report entitled: "Our common future". This report warns that unless the present living patterns are changed, the world will face unacceptable levels of human misery and environmental degradation. The report further concludes that the world economy should meet the people's reasonable needs and aspirations; however, growth must be sought within the carrying capacity of the earth. In the report, the chairman of the commission, Mrs. Gro Harlem Brundtland calls for a new era of an environmentally sound economic development, which has been given the name: 'sustainable development'.

Sheer development is a multi-faceted process to ensure an increase in the economic growth and achieve equity in the distribution of the national income by changing the structures of production and consumption as well as those relating to the social, behavioral, cultural, political and administrative aspects of life. But sustainable development is that which satisfies the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their demand for natural resources. Consequently, sustainable development strikes a balance between the present and future needs. The qualitative needs are represented by the environment in as much as it is the basic reservoir of the natural resources available to a society within a specific period of time in order to meet its present needs without encroaching on those of future generations.

The success of sustainable development depends on the belief and practice of the fact that the Islamic faith lays great stress on improving the condition of earth at the hands of humans, as humans are described as the Khalifa (vicegerents) of Allah on earth. Whatever Allah has created in universe was created in due proportion and measure both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Poverty is considered to be the first environmental problem; the numbers of the poor in the world increased in the early 1990s, decreased by the mid-1990s and rose up once again in the aftermath of the last financial crisis. People living on less than US\$1 a day in 1998 were in the range of 1.2 billion (applying the purchasing power of the 1993 dollar)<sup>(3)</sup>.

Growth will likewise result in pressures on the environment and increase of the demand for natural resources. Development relies on the capacity of the environment to provide human beings with a variety of goods and services for the present generation as well as future ones. For people depend on the environment to obtain food, water, shelter, energy and medicine. The ecological development would certainly conserve the soil productivity, maintain the soundness of the natural food chain and support the biodiversity necessary for reproduction and as a source of food.

Therefore, the real basis of development is in finding the blend of policies, institutions and technologies that could institute a balance among the environmental, social and economic dimensions.

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(3) **The World Bank** (1999), *Report on the World Development*, Washington, USA, p. 7.

### **The Environment and the Gap between Developed Nations and underdeveloped including Islamic Countries:**

In spite of the agreement of the world nations on the urgency to address the environmental degradation, determine the best means to combating it, and adapting to its potential impacts, yet there is an apparent dispute between the developed and Islamic Countries over the necessary measures to achieve the objectives of sustainable development. Needless to say, the measures to be taken by any country would certainly reflect its national conditions and circumstances as well as its economic growth and its vulnerability to the environmental impacts or the actions taken by another country.

The contemporary world has come across essential structural alterations, a fact that greatly influences the nature and forms of international reactions. Whatever the material achievements of mankind, they are basically restricted to the quantitative, rather than qualitative, aspect of development. In reality, all the development strategies pursued by nations, particularly the industrial countries, have been characterized by negligence of the environmental considerations. This has largely contributed to the deterioration of environmental conditions on earth. In the outcome, if a country prepares an environmental budget for its available assets of natural resources, natural debt will be discernible. This debt requires an action to reduce and repay in order to guarantee the adequacy of these resources for future generations. In the last century, human pressures on the ecosystems were mainly represented by the increase of the world production eighteen times over, together with a four-fold doubling of population. In the mean time, the economic and development activities of man had greatly interfered with the natural components in a manner that led to dysfunction of the ecosystems and, consequently, the emergence of severe natural phenomena such as floods, forest fires and land retreat. The number of natural disasters in the last decade increased by three-fold of what it was in the 1990s. Likewise, the economic costs incurred due to these disasters hiked by nine-fold.

The Islamic Countries, poor as they were, had to incur the largest portion of such costs<sup>(4)</sup>. Although environmental policies will, in the main, complement and strengthen development, however in most cases the poorest are the most affected by environment degradation. The poor, unlike the rich, can hardly afford to defend themselves against many forms of pollution relating to their life patterns, most probably, the lands of the poor will be exposed to soil erosion. A large portion of their living is obtained from public sources such as the common grazing lands and forests from where they usually gather foodstuff, the fuel, and building materials. The loss of these sources would surely impose risk especially on the poor. It is rightly held, therefore, that the environmentally sound policies are those firmly based on a process of redistribution<sup>(5)</sup>.

The environmental problems faced by the Islamic Countries, such as polluted water, lack of wastewater treatment, soil erosion, cooking emissions, coal emissions are quite different from those encountered by the rich, developed countries. Developed nations, however, mainly face such problems as ozone depletion, climate change, acid rain, hazardous wastes and the like.

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(4) *Ibid.*, p.12.

(5) *Ibid.*, p. 92.

It is appropriately said that environmental problems in the Islamic Countries are more dangerous, direct and immediate to life. However, this does not imply underestimating the environmental problems in the developed nations. But, as the developed nations are supposed to solve the problems of their own, they are also requested to play a decisive role in enhancing the environment in the Islamic Countries. By and large, the present environmental problems are more the result of over-consumption in the developed nations than that of the huge population growth in the Islamic Countries. For instance, the United States of America has 5 percent of the world population, but its share of the world product is 25 percent with consumption of 25 percent of the world energy and is responsible for 22 percent of total CO<sub>2</sub> emissions into the atmosphere.

In contrast, India has 16 percent of the world population; but its share of the world product is merely 1 percent with a consumption of 2 percent of world energy and is responsible for only 3 percent of the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions<sup>(6)</sup>.

In view of this disparity, and in light of the fact that protection of the environment is a joint responsibility of the world community, the developed nations should bear their historical and essential responsibility for the global environmental degradation<sup>(7)</sup>. On this basis, the developed countries have to increase their contribution in the budgets of the international organizations so that environmental programs in the Islamic Countries could be financed. They are also requested to accelerate the pace of capacity building and transfer of technology to the Islamic Countries in addition to a commitment to maintain the level of support agreed to under the auspices of the United Nations.

### **Sustainable Development and the World Environmental Challenges:**

The economic changes, over the last few decades, had hastened and increased within the framework of the successive scientific and technological developments in the world whereas the average per capita exceeded US\$5,000 per annum (that is, over \$13 per day), which is in the region of 2.6 times of the level of 1950, yet the figures of the world average income would normally conceal the great disparities among the various parts of the world. For example, there are over 1300 billion persons in the world living under one dollar a day. Beside this indicator of quantitative poverty, there is a qualitative deterioration in human life as scarcity of potable water and bad sewage systems dominate 80 percent of the lands in the Islamic Countries in these areas, 5 million persons die every year, half of them children. Similarly, almost 1 million persons inhabiting the cities are exposed to pollution levels that are detrimental to health; due to this, 50,000 persons die and 400,00 others are annually infected with pneumonic symptoms.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates diseases resulting from environmental deterioration at 25 percent of the world total preventable diseases<sup>(8)</sup>. The

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(6) **Alla Al-Haddidi**, The Earth Summit and North-South Relation. *The Journal of International Politics*, October 1992, p. 94.

(7) **Mohammed Al-Mousalha**, The Role of International Arrangement in the Environmental Protection, the *Journal of International Politics*, October 1992, p. 228.

(8) **World Health Organization (WHO)**, *World Health Report (1998): Life in the 21st Century: A Vision for All*, Geneva, Switzerland.

most salient features of environmental deterioration in the Islamic Countries include water pollution, lack of proper sewage treatment, and increase of fumes in the residential areas, and exposure to insects or disease-carrying animals.

Pollution and threats to the environment are certainly numerous. However, the priorities of environmental issues or challenges are different from one area to another as from country to country and period to period.

All nations, especially the developing ones, are first aiming to eradicate poverty and solve the problems of thirst and hunger at the global level.

### **International cooperation for sustainable development:**

Undoubtedly, all nations are equally eager to maintain their economic welfare and stability. Some of them even exhibit an ambition to accelerate their economic development. Achieving such objectives depends on several things, the most important of which is the ability to adapt to international changes. This involves putting into action clear-cut policies with specific priorities to augment a country's share of international trade and investment. It also entails implementing programs, which are geared to promote the quality of human beings, acquire advanced technologies, establish a sustainable production base, and introduce a climate of competition in the domestic market to unleash creativity and boost production. In the meantime, this will ensure a better quality of life through conservation of the natural and environmental resources at the behest of man<sup>(9)</sup>.

Islamic teachings were pioneer in the domain of conservation, sustainable development and resource management, and one which constantly sought to maintain a harmonious balance between man and nature. Religious awareness and Islamic guidance include a call to all individuals, at all levels and by all possible means, to commit themselves to Islamic morals and manners in dealing with nature, the Environment and the natural resources for their sustainable use and development.

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(9) **Abdullah al-Quaiz**, Challenges of Economic Development in the Member Countries of Gulf Cooperation Council in View of Globalization, the *Arabian Gulf and the Challenges of the 21st Century*, the Development Forum, Kuwait, 1999, p. 127.